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## Bill would let voters in urban Texas counties decide on fees, taxes for transit projects

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North Texas officials have been saying for years that residents here would willingly pay more taxes if only they could get better roads and expanded rail service. If a bill introduced Monday becomes law, they may finally get to test their theory.

The bill would permit counties in Texas' largest urban areas to hold elections in which voters would be asked to pay higher taxes or fees, or both, to fund transportation projects. Most of the money would go to rail, though such cities as Dallas and Richardson, where residents already pay for transit through higher sales taxes, could use the money for highway projects, too.

The bill authorizes a menu of six fees or taxes officials could ask voters to support, and leaves up to each county which new revenue sources to seek.

"I don't think you are going to see any county ask voters to approve all the choices at one time," said Sen. John Carona, R-Dallas, chairman of the Senate Committee on Transportation and Homeland Security. "Local officials will decide which combination of sources to propose."

State Rep. Vicki Truitt, R-Southlake, pledged Monday to shepherd the bill through the House.

### Dismal history

Hundreds of bills are filed each session of the Legislature, and many die quickly. And this bill has an especially troubled history. North Texas officials asked the Legislature in 2005 and again in 2007 to let them hold sales tax elections to raise funds for rail projects, and twice lawmakers refused.

But on Monday, dozens of mayors, transit officials and other leaders joined Carona and Truitt to hail the bill's introduction. They predicted that its dual focus on highways and rail – and the fact that it would not permit sales tax increases – makes it a stronger and more flexible approach than taken previously.

"What we really did after seeing what happened in the last session is take off our individual hats and truly work together," said Tarrant County Judge Glen Whitley. "It really comes down to local control."

### Economy a factor

"This is a big deal for small cities," said Mayor Ken Shetter of Burleson, where officials hope a suburban rail line will one day connect residents there to Fort Worth.

Michael Morris, director of transportation for the North Central Texas Council of Governments, said that if the bill passes, it will take at least a year for the planning agency to design a plan for how to spend the money and what to put on each county's ballot. With the economy down, some counties may choose to wait before asking voters to pay more, he said.

The counties' options range from a 10-cent increase in gas taxes to new fees levied for used-car registrations to an "impact fee" for new residents.

### Opposition muted

Carona said the conditions for passing the bill "are favorable," especially because opposition from big business groups that killed the previous two bills is expected to be muted.

"There was opposition to the sales tax increase. Gov. [Rick] Perry opposed it – and we respect that," he said.

But he said support for the new approach – especially the range of choices – has been growing. Lawmakers in Travis County and Bexar County – home to Austin and San Antonio, respectively – are supportive, he said. He has spoken to Perry, he said, and the governor has "indicated to me that he supports this approach."

Perry said as much in discussions with *The Dallas Morning News*, but also said he first wanted to see the bill filed.

Not everyone is ready to predict an easy route to passage, however.

Absent from Monday's pep rally were most of the lawmakers from Collin County, including Sen. Florence Shapiro, R-Plano, and staunch light-rail opponent Rep. Ken Paxton of McKinney.

### At a glance: Transportation funding

A bill filed Monday would allow county commissioners to call an election to ask voters to approve new taxes or fees to pay for transportation projects. Voters could be asked to approve one or all of the following, and counties could decide to reduce some of the fees for low-income residents:

**Up to a 10-cent increase** in per-gallon gasoline taxes, with the increase adjusted each year to keep pace with inflation.

**A "local option mobility improvement fee"** not to exceed \$60 a year.

**A parking fee** of up to \$1 per hour per space, though details were unspecified.

**An annual motor** vehicle emissions fee up to \$15.

**A driver's license renewal fee** equal to the current registration fee, which is \$24 every six years for most drivers, and \$8 for senior citizens.

**Up to a \$250 fee** for new residents who register cars previously registered in another state.

